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Designers bring global touch to local spaces



ca Kahn Wichmann and Efraim Wichmann are the architectural and interior design

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Jessica Kahn Wichmann and Efraim Wichmann are the architectural and interior design team of Zeitgeist Sonoma. (Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

MEG MCCONAHEY

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In their younger years, designers Jessica and Efraim

Wichmann explored the world, from Morocco to India. They became temporary locals, studying not only the architecture and aesthetics of each place, but carefully observing how their homes and buildings and communities reflected how people lived. They noticed details, like how desert-dwellers had sleeping roofs to survive the nights and thick, mud-brick homes with tiny windows to survive the heat of the day.

That experience informed their consciousness about design and gave them a strong commitment to incorporating a sense of time, place and culture into the environments they create for clients.

What works in the North African desert or a crowded city in India doesn't necessarily make sense in the temperate North Bay, with its small towns and open spaces.

The Wichmanns, who met in their 20s on an Israeli kibbutz, are the design team behind the Zeitgeist Sonoma design firm. For the German-born Efraim, the name was a natural. They both believe the word, defined by Merriam-Webster as "the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era," perfectly encapsulates what they strive to bring to each project.

They work out of a home office in a neatly functional converted garage behind their home. They've adapted the 1880s cottage near downtown Santa Rosa to their casual lifestyle, one that must incorporate the needs of two kids, ages 10 and 13, and two dogs.

The blue-gray house, with its stark white gingerbread trim and red door leading into a porch room they enclosed years ago to keep their toddler from running into the street, makes a strong statement.

Each brings individual skills that enable them to offer full design services. Efraim has a degree in architecture from Temple University in Philadelphia; Jessica has a bachelor of fine arts degree in art history and photography from the University of Colorado at Boulder and a master's degree in interior design from Drexel University in Philadelphia.

It was a pilgrimage to Chandigarh, a modernist masterpiece of a city in India designed by the

great Swiss-French architect and urban designer le Corbusier as a "symbol of the nation's faith in the future," that planted the seed for their down-to-earth approach to design.

They found it a beautifully designed city that was completely out of place and context.

"It was spread out, which is great for the automobile, but for the rickshaws isn't so great," said Jessica. "And they had these reflective pools that would be great to add moisture to the air but they had to drain them because they attracted mosquitoes."

The couple found themselves in Santa Rosa after Efraim accepted a job with the architectural firm Quattrocchi Kwok. Jessica worked several doors down with the designer and artist Randolph Johnson.

They took a leap of faith in going out on their own.

Their aesthetic is earthy modern, warmed with natural, artisan and hand-crafted materials, many sourced locally. They seek out texture and authenticity, from custom carpets to hand-forged metalwork to linens with hand-printed graphics.

The desire for tactile materials "is a response to an overly technological society," said Jessica. "We need that touchy-feely warmth to things."

Understanding their clients' needs, tastes and lifestyle is an essential foundation and starting point for any project, they said. It's a process that comes naturally to Jessica, whose parents were psychologists, and Efraim, whose mother was a nurse and social worker.

"Psychology is a huge part of what we do. To get it right, you really have to understand people, to be able to read them," he said.

Both accept individual work. But they love collaboration, seamlessly integrating both the bones and the flesh of a house or remodel from

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the inception to create an environment that doesn't have to sacrifice function for form or vice versa. Often overlooked details, like placement of important furniture pieces, are incorporated into the architectural plans.

The pair have built a strong following on Houzz, the Internet site that is a home remodeling and design idea book — Pinterest and Yelp rolled into one.

Here they can share not only their own work but design ideas, products and materials they like. Clients and other users can interact with their own photos, as well as ask questions and post ratings for designers.

Their online Ideabook includes both their own projects and ideas from other designers that they like.

Zeitgeist Sonoma was recently singled out for a "Best of Houzz" award, a badge honoring "the highest level of customer service" among Houzz users.

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